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SETTING THE ENVIRONMENT FOR LEARNING.

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A NUMBER OF STEPS MUST BE TAKEN BY THE TEACHER OF CULTURALLY DEPRIVED ELEMENTARY STUDENTS TO PROVIDE THEM WITH AN OPTIMAL LEARNING ENVIRONMENT SO THAT THEIR INTELLECTUAL RETARDATION CAN BE CORRECTED AND REVERSED. BECAUSE MUCH OF THE ALIENATION THAT THE DISADVANTAGED STUDENT FEELS IS THE RESULT OF A CURRICULUM WHICH STRESSES FUTURE GOALS AND DWELLS ON WHAT THE STUDENT THINKS IS USELESS INFORMATION, ONE'S METHOD OF TEACHING MUST PROVIDE THE STUDENT WITH A SENSE OF IMMEDIATE UTILITY AND REWARD. TIMID AND CAUTIOUS STUDENTS WHO ARE FREQUENTLY CLASSED AS SLOW LEARNERS MAY BE AS INTELLIGENT AS ARTICULATE STUDENTS, BUT MAY NEED REASSURANCE AND A FREE ATMOSPHERE WHICH ALLOWS FOR LEARNING BY DOING. THE TEACHER MUST ALSO BE AWARE THAT A STUDENT'S READINESS FOR EACH UNIT OF MATERIAL IS OF PRIME IMPORTANCE, AND THUS THE CURRICULUM MUST BE CAREFULLY STRUCTURED TO EXPAND SEQUENTIALLY. DIFFICULTIES WITH LANGUAGE CAN BE OVERCOME BY ALLOWING STUDENTS TO USE THEIR SUB-STANDARD DIALECTS WITHOUT FEAR OF INTIMIDATION BY THE TEACHER, WHILE THEIR KNOWLEDGE OF AND COMPETENCE WITH STANDARD ENGLISH IS INCREASED THROUGH SUCH ACTIVITIES AS CHORAL READING AND WORD GAMES. FINALLY, PROGRAMS FOR DISADVANTAGED STUDENTS MUST BE DIAGNOSTIC IN NATURE AND IMPLEMENTATION, AND BASED ON AN ACCURATE APPRAISAL OF THE CHILD'S POTENTIALITIES AND WEAKNESSES. (THIS ARTICLE APPEARS IN "STATEMENT--THE JOURNAL OF THE COLORADO LANGUAGE ARTS SOCIETY," VOL. 3, NO. 1, DECEMBER 1967.) (DL)

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## SETTING THE ENVIRONMENT FOR LEARNING

*by Betty R. Sepulveda, B.A., M.A.*

David Ausubel tells us that the possibility of arresting and reversing the course of intellectual retardation in the culturally deprived child depends largely in providing him with optimal learning environment as early as possible in the course of his educational career.<sup>1</sup>

In order to provide the best possible learning environment, the elementary school teacher needs to: (1) consider the effects of the curriculum in relation to the child's orientation to life, (2) discover the pupil's style of learning, (3) clarify philosophical inclinations, and (4) develop a program which is diagnostic in nature and implementation.

### 1. THE NEED TO CONSIDER THE EFFECTS OF THE CURRICULUM

Those of us who teach in so-called disadvantaged areas are aware that much of the alienation that the disadvantaged pupil experiences in school is caused not so much by the discriminatory or rejecting attitudes on the part of teachers, although the importance of this factor should not be underestimated, but in greater measure by the cumulative effects of a future oriented, and to the child, seeming useless curriculum. These effects cause the child to experience frustration, confusion, demoralization, resentment, and impaired self-confidence.

To understand the relationship between the "cause and effect" here implied, it is imperative to look at the orientation of the parents and its influence upon the child in relation to the school.

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*The Force of Orientation*

Individuals living in impoverished environments find that the *demands of the present are SO* pressing that little, if any, value is attached to the future. Staten W. Webster mentions that the parents of the culturally deprived child exhibit the "here and now" orientation in their attitudes and behaviors, and that the children for whom they serve as models adopt a similar outlook on life. Hence, the many rewards which the school holds up to the learner—involving delay of weeks, as in the case of grades, or even years, as in preparation for a vocation—seem useless to the present-oriented child, who is aware only of the immediate pressing needs, and who understands rewards only in the immediate present.<sup>11</sup>

Viewed in this light, it is not difficult to understand why the deprived alienates himself first from the teacher as he sets standards and expectations for the present-oriented as for the future-oriented middle-class child—even though to do so is to insure the failure of the former. The deprived child alienates himself, next, from the kind of learning environment that overwhelms him by exposure to tasks that exceed by far his level of readiness. The alienation now results in a negative attitude toward learning. At this point, doing himself untold damage, he decides to use his time and energy—within the physical setting of the classroom—to show resentment clothed in hostile behavior which, in turn, becomes a learned way of life for under apparent directed guidance, he practices and perfects these hostile behavior patterns as he waits to be chronologically of age to alienate himself from school permanently as a DROPOUT.

*How is the Problem Approached?*

Teachers, according to Dr. Shaftel, have hinged their actions in the classroom on the "... fixed notion that the most important thing they have to do is to teach children certain skills and bodies of knowledge in order to get them up—scorewise—to grade level, to pass the test, to get the achievement scores, which is a measureable symbol of the pupil's success as well as of their own."<sup>9</sup>

The efforts over the country that have come out under O.E.O. and N.D.E.A. programs, as evaluated by the seven evaluation teams selected by the U. S. Office of Education, indicate the

pitfalls of focusing on achievement. The results show that most of the efforts to attain achievement are focused on remediation, and that remediation puts the stress on a very narrow drills and skills approach which illustrates that the teacher using "drill" as a method views the presentation of subject matter rather than the student as central in the learning situation.

While attention to both factors is essential, the problem of the disadvantaged learner requires (a) that the teacher be more student-centered than subject-centered; and (b) that METHOD be viewed principally as a general process of providing interaction between pupils and the learning environment, which in turn stresses subject matter geared to the learner's existing state of readiness, and that the subject matter used be structured optimally to facilitate efficient sequential learning.

Ericson's study<sup>3</sup> reveals that the environment of the middle class child makes early and consistent demands for personal attainment, while the environment of the Mexican-American is more responsive to reward potential of the situation. Thus a broad concept of method is indicative, one that will have both a philosophical and psychological dimension. If method becomes a process of arranging subject matter so that it can be effectively used by the learner, there is an obligation placed upon the teacher to become so familiar with the learner, and his style of learning, that he can effectively make the arrangement of subject matter to meet the needs, interests, and level of maturity of the child.

## 2. THE NEED TO DISCOVER THE DISADVANTAGED CHILD'S STYLE OF LEARNING

In his article, "The Slow Gifted Child," Riessman brings out "... that it is often contended that deprived children are non-verbal, that they think in a slow inadequate manner, and that they cannot conceptualize. . ." but that while there are elements of truth in the foregoing statement, the picture is distorted in portion by the confusion that prevails in educational circles between the terms "Poor Learner" and "Slow Learner." The confusion lies in that the two terms are assumed to be identical. But could the SLOWNESS of the "Slow Learner" simply be an indication of another style of learning with potential strengths of its own?<sup>8</sup> The confusion seems to have

been brought about first by faulty research. McAnulty<sup>5</sup> reported as early as 1932 that the I.Q. level for various groups of Mexican-American children ranged from about 78-91. It wasn't until comparatively recently that specific studies such as that of Nathan<sup>6</sup> emphasized the inadequacy of the tests themselves. He states that to evaluate pupils of different cultural backgrounds with the same instruments as middle class English speaking children is to operate on an invalid premise. Secondly, the confusion was substantiated by the deprived child's responses to academic problems. He requires more examples before seeing a point, more examples before arriving at a conclusion or forming a concept. Therefore, according to Fargo,<sup>4</sup> only little research has been undertaken thus far to consider the Mexican-American's educational problem in our public schools; and little or no mention is made in Educational Psychology courses even at the graduate level, of this type of child's style of learning, or even that indication of another style of learning may exist. Hence, confusion prevails.

However, Reissman contends that slowness may indicate caution on the part of the child, a desire to be very thorough, an emphasis on the concrete, fear of the unknown, or readiness difficulty.<sup>8</sup>

#### *The Consistency Factor*

To educators, it is vital to note how consistently slowness shows up in the child's behavior. Many contend that in several phases of behavior, the disadvantaged is not slow. In games he functions rapidly, and seems to think quickly; in evaluating attitudes and expressions on people's faces, he seems perceptive and quick, his responses being immediate retaliation or withdrawal. This child, when verbalizing in his own idiom, does not appear sluggish, nor when relating to those who understand him.

If this picture is substantially correct, the child's slowness revealed in the academic sphere may be due to a multiplicity of apparently insignificant yet crucial points of pedagogical lacks.

#### *Specific Areas to Consider*

The report of the NCTE Task Force on Teaching English to the Disadvantaged asserts that, according to scores in academic potential and reading readiness tests, the gap between disadvantaged and middle class children is at its smallest when both enter school. This gap then widens as the two groups progress



during classroom instruction when logically the process should be narrowed. This observation is based on sixty different programs, each indicating that the schools have been unable to overcome—have even intensified—this initial handicap in the most critical school years (K-3 or 1-3). As a direct outcome, the gap becomes more pronounced thereafter.<sup>7</sup>

a. *Lack of familiarity with subject.* The first of the specific areas to consider is unfamiliarity with a subject that is introduced to a child before his particular level of readiness is established.

Ausubel<sup>1</sup> defines readiness as “. . . merely a necessary first step in preparing a child to cope with more advanced subject matter.” I would stress, in addition to his definition, each sequential step in presenting a specific concept within a particular subject. For example, in learning that the geometric shape “the circle” is a closed line, the pupil, because of short attention span in listening to a complete spoken statement, may emerge with the misconception that a circle is a “clothes line”—this is what he hears. This misunderstanding indicates that he needs specific readiness in increasing his attention span, listening ability, sharpening discrimination of sounds of like words as between *closed* and *clothes*, or even increasing his vocabulary by adding the word “closed.” In any case, the teaching of the definition of “circle” must be delayed and the other phases given precedence.

The example illustrates that important phases of readiness are at times overlooked by teachers for one of two apparently predominant reasons.

1. The first may be due to a faulty assumption that readiness is a result of the child's “natural growth”; therefore, the teacher needs to do little about the matter. Assuming that, since no one can accelerate growth, both parents at home and teachers in the classroom “just wait” for time to elapse because, according to them, when the physical growth does occur, readiness will automatically emerge as well. Meanwhile, the child develops without specific guidance from home or school, intensifying his lacks, and handicapping his future academic opportunity by practicing poor use of time, by creating disturbances in order to keep himself occupied, and developing a negative attitude toward home and parents, school and learning, simply because his needs and interests go unmet.

To correct this sequence of events, it is necessary to recognize that the physical phase develops unaided and at its own individual pace in each child, but that the mental and emotional phases necessary for undertaking instruction can be aided by organized environment experiences at each succeeding level of learning.

2. The second reason why important phases of readiness may be overlooked by the teacher may be due to lack of importance attached to readiness as a sequential phase of instruction. This oversight may occur because the teacher lacks specialization in the area of Child Growth and Development which would afford him diagnostic techniques to appraise and recognize levels of emotional maturity, and to discover specific levels of readiness in order to prescribe for the child activities which result in foundations on which learning can be built.

General readiness includes experiences prior to a lesson that fosters willingness, personal interest, concept development, vocabulary development, and skills and understandings to engage in a given learning activity.

Ausubel tells us that "... mastery and consolidation of all ongoing learning tasks before new tasks are introduced is needed so as to provide the necessary foundation for successful sequential learning and prevent unreadiness for future learning tasks. . . ." Furthermore, nothing is more educationally futile or better calculated to destroy educational morale than chronic academic failure and exposure to an unsuitable curriculum.<sup>1</sup>

b. *The role of language.* Another specific area to consider is the difficulty the deprived child experiences in relation to limitations with formal language.

The need to translate speech from standard English (the formal language the teacher uses in the classroom) to sub-standard English (the language often used by the deprived child) plus a possible third level of translation (as in the case of the child who speaks Spanish in the home, but who has learned sub-standard English from his family and peers) is a strong contributing factor to slowness.

This complicated process is demoralizing to the child first, because much of the teacher's language must undergo personal



translation, throughout the day, before what is expected in class can be understood. Next, because the child is made to feel that *his* language is wrong, he suffers from not being able to express his thoughts in the classroom openly. He is forced to hide from the teacher to communicate with others, so he appears devious, insincere, and dishonest; when found out, he displays signs of guilt that cause failure in his relations with the teacher. Lastly, because just as the sub-standard language hampers the child's social standing in the classroom, so does standard English make him a social outcast with his family and peers out of school.

Linguists over the country suggest that the disadvantaged child develop a new language pattern at school. This does not mean that he must replace his sub-standard language; it just means that he must be taught to distinguish between the two and use each in its place. They advocate that when the child enters school, the emphasis be on COMMUNICATIONS, not on what level of English should be spoken; therefore the teacher begins by giving the child many opportunities to use *his* language in class. This, to the child, is a sign of acceptance. The teacher will not stop the child as he speaks, saying, "We don't say gots"; he will just listen and encourage the child's expressions, thus indicating to him that what he contributes is of importance. In this setting, the child will develop security and courage to tackle a new environment and new language patterns which will become the vehicle for learning.

If we can accept the philosophy implied in the foregoing, the nature of our solution might take the following direction.

The teacher should use an oral language approach, preferably in an area completely new to the child—one which introduces him to standard usage of English. This approach is a method similar to that used in teaching a foreign language where the emphasis is placed on listening, then on speaking. The new area may be poetry; poetry introduces him to formal language exercises daily, yet does not deny him the opportunity to use *his* sub-standard language related to all other aspects of communication within the classroom environment.

For example, if related to poetry, a choral reading type of activity can be used giving the teacher an avenue by which, at this particular time only, she can stress formal English in a

highly structured manner, beginning with short four-line poems based on subjects of high interest to the first grader that will help him hear, speak, and learn to communicate with others, using new language patterns. The poems will gradually build up a repertoire which will help the child express his feeling of wonder, for instance. By involving many of the child's physical gestures in the activity, the teacher will reinforce new language patterns of standard usage.

The procedure of presentation must be simple, yet consistent, in order to afford the child security. The poem, "Jack in the Box" is a good starter because it involves listening first, and a verbal response as well. To teach it, the teacher slowly says the phrase, for example, "Jack in the box," etc., etc.,—then allows time for the class as a whole to repeat the same phrase after her (thus not putting, as it were, any one child on the spot but requiring all to speak); the teacher says the next phrase, then the class, until the entire poem has been said. After several repetitions, discuss the characteristics of a "good leader,"—mainly that a "good leader" speaks clearly so all can hear (I use the term "big voice") and says all the sounds in the words. Then ask if there is someone who wishes to lead the class. The teacher will find that soon a "round-robin" type of activity will develop where the first leader selects a friend to lead after him, each giving courage to the next until all children in the class participate. All the while, the teacher is teaching formal language by a self-motivating play activity that will quickly help the child replace sub-standard language patterns and become fluent in the language of the classroom. He will also gradually generalize that this formal language used during "*poem time*" is used in school and in society, but he is not asked to part with the type of communication needed in his out-of-school socialization. He learns to use each in its place but does not experience humiliation because of the ways that he speaks outside of school and does not develop negative attitudes toward formal language.

All this time, the teacher is teaching formal language by the best possible method known to educators—learning by doing—and is using a highly recommended developmental sequence in language activities and their interrelations: direct experience, listening, speaking, reading, and writing, if this approach is followed through.

At each of these phases, the child reinforces the succeeding step in the developmental sequence. Listening about an interesting game or enjoyable experience becomes a voluntary action on the part of the learner; speaking involves expressing concepts and meanings learned and understood; reading can be, at first, matching by writing the poem on a chart and making duplicate word cards, a rote matching activity that leads to visual discrimination of letters and word forms. This discrimination, in turn, will develop a sight vocabulary and lead directly into the more formal concept of reading. Writing becomes a vehicle to express creatively his thoughts and feelings.

Three changes will be apparent as the child becomes secure and fluent in new language patterns: (1) he will make less use of non-verbal forms of communication, (2) he will not resort to whispering in his own idiom, since he can now communicate with both the teacher and the class, (3) he will contribute in class situations, showing he feels a part of the group.

The preceding example represents one way of approaching the deprived child's limitation with formal language. Each teacher, depending on the level and the maturity of the class, must expand the oral approach. Much of the success of this technique depends on the creativity and flexibility of the teacher.

According to Riessman, the deprived child functions best in a more physical setting for in the physical areas this child can be fast and acute. He suggests that this child be called the "Physical Learner" since he approaches abstractions from the concrete, responds much more to the external, and the external stimulation must precede the inner development.<sup>8</sup>

#### *The Importance of the Game Format*

One of the surest ways to involve the "physical learner" in an activity is, as the foregoing example illustrates, to make a game out of it.

The game format is appealing to the physical learner because it represents the combined philosophical inclinations that the child responds to best. Secondly, most games are generally concerned with direct action and quick visible results which the physical learner expects from all involvements; furthermore, the game format provides concreteness with which to approach

abstractions. Since this child needs to have the abstract constantly and intimately pinned to the immediate, he responds readily to games. In addition, the "physical learner" appreciates the sharply defined, highly structured, clear-cut rules of a game.

D. G. Schubert tells us that ". . . the success of educational games is closely related to the satisfaction of basic psychological needs. Social motives in particular are involved. Through games a child can give vent to his desires to assert himself, to win in competition, to display his ability, and to gain ego recognition. He gains self confidence, satisfaction, and comfort from knowing and abiding by the rules of a game. Feelings of belonging grow out of his social intercourse with others. Indeed, the rewards of social participation are among the strongest motivators in a game-approach to learning . . ." <sup>10</sup>

### 3. THE NEED TO CLARIFY THE PHILOSOPHICAL INCLINATIONS

Riessman makes a valuable contribution when he explains the need for a new combined philosophy that can break through the block which separate the child and the school.

Progressive education emphasizes "learning by doing" which fits the learning style of the physical learner; it emphasizes concrete, experience-centered learning attuned to the pace of the child. But the progressive approach does not succeed alone because other of its features are alien to the culture of the deprived: the permissiveness, the stress on play, and the underestimation of discipline and authority.

What is needed in the new combination is to retain those features of the progressive that fit the physical approach of the deprived and to add to them the highly structured lessons stressed in the traditional: the organization, the rules, and external demands for achievement. The teacher who through special study and dedication has arrived to the point of merging the two is most effective with the deprived. <sup>8</sup>

### 4. THE NEED TO DEVELOP A PROGRAM WHICH IS DIAGNOSTIC IN NATURE AND IMPLEMENTATION

The implications in the foregoing discussion reveal the need to develop or adapt a curriculum which takes into account the



learning style of the child and a new combined *traditional-progressive* philosophy.

This task is by no means simple, but it is not unsurmountable either. Pin-pointing the child's strengths and weaknesses, capacities, and interests on which to build a program first necessitates an APPRAISAL of the child's early experiences.

One excellent source that will help the teacher in this area is "Diagnosing Reading Difficulties Through Classroom Procedures." This monograph gives specific ideas on gathering information to round out the picture of the pupils in a forthcoming class. It calls specific attention to (1) the values and the limitations found in the information listed in cumulative records, (2) tests that research has found valid, (3) uses to be made of non-verbal, non-language sections of intelligence tests, and (4) a most reputable source that presents reviews and critiques of tests the teacher may want to use.

Cautions about information and diagnosis given in the monograph are illustrated in the following: ". . . information in and of itself has never particularly helped a pupil; it is the adjustment of instruction in the light of the information that makes the difference. . ." Diagnosis implies assessment to be used in correcting weaknesses and ". . . the best diagnosis is useless unless it is used as a blueprint for instruction. . ."<sup>2</sup>

Another excellent source, Carrillo's *Informal Reading-Readiness Experiences*, summarizes the theory of readiness concisely, discusses instruments used in the diagnosing and evaluating stages of readiness, offers a usable reading readiness checklist, and presents sequences of experiences arranged by skill areas in brief form.

Secondly, SELECTION of the most profitable activities to foster the child's development is an area that every teacher, whether he be a teacher of the disadvantaged or not, must approach. But the fact to consider is that, because of the physical learner's orientation (he does little thinking aside from thinking through a problem), activities should center around problems to be solved. Even though he has a short attention span and might be reluctant at first to tackle a problem, he is often attracted to a problem and works long periods of time in solving it.



Lastly, the teacher must STRUCTURE learning materials to facilitate effective sequential learning. Highly structured materials and lessons psychologically and philosophically appeal to the physical learner's inclinations. As each sequential step is introduced and standards developed, he is made to feel secure, and since he responds much more to the external, materials he can handle for a specific purpose create the external stimulation that (in his case) must precede the inner development.

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